

When signers and speakers construct action, do they (also/always) role shift?

This presentation focuses on both “role shifting” and “constructed action”, mainly as they occur in signed languages, but also in (multimodal) spoken language discourse. I intend to show that, contrary to what is suggested in many recent publications, it is important to keep these two mechanisms apart and define them differently.

Some of the first modern sign linguistic studies discuss the use of the signer’s body to refer to somebody else. Friedman (1975:950), for example, writes that American signers may “take on” a third person reference, “in much the same way (conceptually) that the speaker takes on 3P reference in 3P narrative prose in oral language”. “Role shifting” was shown to be marked non-manually, e.g. by a shift in body positioning and in eye-gaze behaviour (Padden 1986) and non-manual features of a similar kind were reported for a wide variety of signed languages. However, all signed languages contain examples of role shifting structures lacking overt marking. Also, role shifting may occur independent from direct speech. Such observations have inspired some authors to present a more fine-grained analysis, e.g. Engberg-Pedersen (1993)’s well-known proposal to distinguish between 1) shifted reference, 2) shifted attribution of expressive elements, and 3) shifted locus for Danish Sign Language.

In recent work, often from within a cognitive linguistic framework, what was previously called “role shift(ing)” is referred to as “constructed action”. Cormier, Smith and Sevcikova (2013), for example, write: “constructed action (CA, or enactment, also known as role-shift), where the signer uses his or her body (the head, face, arms and torso) to represent the thoughts, feelings or actions of a referent using the surrounding space on a real world scale”. The notion of CA was introduced by Winston (1991) and Metzger (1995) and inspired by the work of Tannen (1989) on “constructed dialogue” in spoken languages. Originally, CA was defined as “gestures to illustrate/re-construct the action of others.”

In this study, I argue that role shifting and constructed action are not the same phenomenon (cf. also Herrmann and Steinbach, 2012). This can for example be seen when constructed action is used as an alternative for a lexical verb sign or a classifier predicate and the signer “illustrates the action” but without reference to any “other”.

I explore the relationship between the two, studying their form(s) and function(s)/meaning(s). This is based on a review of the literature related to other signed languages, as well as on the analysis of role shifting structures and instances of constructed action as they appear in the Flemish Sign Language Corpus (www.corpusvgt.ugent.be).

Further, I will (briefly) compare role shifting and constructed action in signed discourse to examples of role shifting and constructed action in the spoken (multimodal) language use of stand-up comedians. Such a comparison shows, once again, that when signed language use is compared to speech + gesture rather than to speech alone, similarities are striking (Vermeerbergen and Demey, 2007).

References

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